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DISMANTLING A DEFICIT PERSPECTIVE AND MOVING TOWARDS A CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY IN SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

Research has stipulated that deficit thinking is often a major barrier to reducing educational inequalities. It relates to a discourse of negativity and disempowerment, ignores students' cultural strengths, diminishes the value of their lived experiences, and falsely validates negative perceptions of their families or communities. Several students who experienced deficit thinking became disengaged or dropped out of school. Help is limited because deficit thinking often remains an unseen issue in the education system, but its impact is far-reaching and harmful to the students concerned. On the other hand, educators assume they can't support students, leading them to lower expectations for students. This qualitative case study was conducted in 3 secondary schools in the Buffalo Municipality, Eastern Cape, South Africa. Purposive sampling was used to sample the participants. The participants consisted of 30 teachers. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and observations. Thematic data analysis was employed to analyse the data collected. All ethical issues were considered. The study was driven by the Valencia Deficit Theory (2010). Valencia echoed that deficit thinking situates school failure in students' minds, bodies, communities, and cultures, and that it dominates schooling practices worldwide. Findings revealed that schools should adopt an inclusive approach that considers the cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of all learners. Culturally responsive pedagogy is regarded as a pedagogy of hope that dismantles deficit perspectives and treats all learners equally and fairly in schools. The study recommended conducting a longitudinal research study to track changes in traits and the outcomes of using Culturally Responsive Pedagogy.

Keywords: deficit perspective, culturally responsive pedagogy, equality, South Africa

INTRODUCTION

Educational systems have long operated within frameworks that unintentionally marginalize students from diverse cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. One of the most persistent and harmful of these frameworks is the deficit perspective, the belief that students who struggle academically do so because of perceived shortcomings within themselves, their families, or their communities. This perspective shifts responsibility away from systemic inequities and instructional practices and instead places blame on students. The persistent achievement gap in educational settings is frequently misinterpreted through a deficit lens that positions students from non-dominant backgrounds as lacking necessary skills or cultural capital (Murry et al., 2020). This framework locates perceived ineptitude within the student rather than acknowledging systemic biases inherent in standardized curricula and evaluation tools that favor dominant cultural norms (Belle, 2010; Knowles-Davis & Moore, 2023). Consequently, this perspective frames cultural differences as weaknesses rather than

recognizing them as potential sources of academic excellence (Finkelstein et al., 2021). To counter these entrenched assumptions, culturally responsive pedagogy reframes education as a political act that requires educators to engage in critical self-reflection to validate the diverse knowledge systems students bring to the classroom (Golden, 2017). This approach challenges the prevalence of deficit thinking, a harmful ideology that attributes academic struggles to perceived deficiencies in students' cultural knowledge or their families' valuation of education (Constant, 2022).

Rather than viewing students' cultural backgrounds as obstacles to overcome, this pedagogical stance emphasizes integrating home languages and dialects as assets that foster a more inclusive learning environment (Marks, 2022). Central to this framework is the concept of cultural integrity, which requires educators to allow students to maintain their cultural identities, including the use of home languages within the classroom setting (Adams et al., 2018).

UNDERSTANDING DEFICIT PERSPECTIVE

Deficit thinking is a pseudoscience founded on racial and class bias. It "blames the victim" for school failure instead of examining how schools are structured to prevent poor students and students of color from learning. Dismantling Contemporary Deficit Thinking provides comprehensive critiques and anti-deficit thinking alternatives to this oppressive theory by framing the linkages between prevailing theoretical perspectives and contemporary practices within the complex historical development of deficit thinking.
The deficit perspective assumes that students who do not conform to dominant cultural norms lack motivation, ability, or parental support. Historically, this ideology has been embedded in schooling structures influenced by assimilationist policies and inequitable power dynamics.
For example, interpretations of achievement gaps often center on what students “lack” rather than examining disparities in funding, access to advanced coursework, representation in curriculum, or culturally aligned teaching practices. Scholars such as Gloria Ladson-Billings have argued that the so-called achievement gap is better understood as an “education debt”—a cumulative result of historical, economic, and sociopolitical inequities.

Deficit thinking manifests in several ways:

- Lowered expectations for students of color or multilingual learners
- Overidentification in special education
- Disciplinary disparities
- Curriculum that centers dominant narratives while marginalizing others

Such patterns reinforce systemic inequities and perpetuate cycles of underachievement not because students lack ability, but because systems fail to value and respond to their strengths.
In contrast, culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) offers a transformative alternative. Rather than viewing students’ identities as obstacles, CRP recognizes culture, language, and lived experience as assets that enhance learning. Dismantling deficit thinking and moving toward culturally responsive practice is not simply an instructional shift; it is an ethical and educational imperative. Culturally responsive pedagogy is a crucial framework that enriches educational experiences in increasingly diverse classrooms by integrating students' cultural

backgrounds, life experiences, and perspectives into the learning process (Caingcoy, 2023; Küçükakın et al., 2025). This approach posits that effective teaching must recognize and value students' cultural identities as integral assets, thereby enhancing engagement and learning outcomes (Ramli et al., 2025). This pedagogical framework emphasizes the development of cultural competence among educators, the incorporation of culturally relevant content into the curriculum, and the cultivation of positive teacher-student relationships (Abdalla & Moussa, 2024). Central to CRP is integrating cultural references into curricular design, making educational content more relatable and meaningful to diverse student populations (Okafor, 2024). It acknowledges that culture is fundamental to all learning, positioning teachers as facilitators who create inclusive and equitable learning environments by connecting academic content to students' cultural contexts (Jia & Nasri, 2019; Shohel et al., 2024). This includes leveraging students' "funds of knowledge," which encompass their existing cultural knowledge and experiences, to bridge the gap between home and school environments and promote deeper academic engagement (Caingcoy, 2023). This pedagogical approach, encompassing culturally responsive teaching and culturally relevant pedagogy, explicitly acknowledges how students' cultural backgrounds shape their learning processes and seeks to sustain these backgrounds within educational settings (Anyichie & Butler, 2023).

By validating and affirming students' identities, CRP aims to foster critical thinking and improve academic achievement, recognizing that learning is a socially mediated process inextricably linked to students' racial, cultural, and linguistic experiences (Caingcoy, 2023; Pinetta, 2023; Prayitno et al., 2024). Its systematic description by Gay and Ladson-Billings established CRP as a research-based practice, evolving to incorporate institutional, peer, and psychological dimensions that collectively influence educational outcomes (Zeng et al., 2025). Specifically, culturally responsive teaching is characterized by its validating and affirming nature, acknowledging the legitimacy of various ethnic groups' cultural heritages and using them as foundational elements for instruction (Fields, 2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The persistent influence of deficit-laden biases, often stemming from technocratic perspectives, significantly impacts pedagogical approaches, particularly concerning students from diverse racial, cultural, or linguistic backgrounds (Murry et al., 2020). These perceptions often position students who do not conform to the established systemic norms as "lacking" or "deficient," rather than recognizing the mismatch between their lived experiences and the dominant cultural expectations of the educational system (Belle, 2010). This framework, therefore, tends to invalidate students' existing ways of being and knowing, perpetuating an internalized deficit perspective (Cabiles, 2024). This paradigm overlooks the rich cultural capital and diverse epistemologies that students from marginalized communities bring to the classroom, thereby hindering their engagement and academic performance (Fahadah & Thomps, 2025). Consequently, such approaches often lead to diminished student engagement and academic achievement, particularly among marginalized populations (Fahadah & Thomps, 2025). In contrast, culturally responsive pedagogy offers a transformative framework that directly challenges these deficit paradigms by valuing students' cultural backgrounds and integrating them into the learning process (Knowles-Davis & Moore, 2023). This pedagogical shift acknowledges students' multifaceted identities,

moving beyond static notions of culture to embrace a multiplicity of practices as cultural processes (Golden, 2017). By synthesizing various literature sources, the importance of recognizing cultural backgrounds, fostering positive relationships, adapting instructional strategies, and promoting critical consciousness within educational settings becomes evident (Caingcoy, 2023). This systematic approach emphasizes the crucial role of educators in developing an understanding of their students' cultural backgrounds and histories, alongside cultivating authentic relationships (Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024). Such an approach intrinsically validates the diverse cultural knowledge and experiences that students bring, thereby fostering a more inclusive and equitable learning environment that actively bridges the cultural divide between educators and learners (Fahadah & Thomps, 2025). Indeed, culturally responsive pedagogy is a crucial framework in education that leverages students' diverse backgrounds to foster inclusive learning environments (Caingcoy, 2023).

This pedagogical approach enhances academic achievement and engagement by acknowledging and integrating students' cultural perspectives into instructional practices (Caingcoy, 2023; Fahadah & Thomps, 2025). It actively seeks to embed students' cultural experiences, values, and perspectives into the curriculum, thereby fostering greater student engagement and academic success (Shohel et al., 2024). This integration is crucial not only for validating students' identities but also for building upon their unique knowledge and schema to propel learning and critical thinking (Hernandez & Darling-Hammond, 2022). This framework, drawing from the theoretical foundations of Critical Race Theory and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, challenges institutionalized discrimination and empowers students through culturally affirming teaching practices (Abdalla & Moussa, 2024). Deficit thinking, particularly prevalent in educational contexts, attributes academic underperformance to perceived shortcomings in students, their families, or their communities rather than acknowledging systemic inequities (Skelton, 2019). This perspective often overlooks the powerful institutional and societal forces that perpetuate disparities in educational outcomes, thereby individualizing what are fundamentally systemic problems (Davis & Museus, 2019).

THE THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF CRP

Culturally responsive pedagogy emerged as a response to deficit-oriented schooling. Gloria Ladson-Billings introduced the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy in the 1990s, emphasizing three key components:

- Academic success
- Cultural competence
- Critical consciousness (Billing, 2004)

Later, Geneva Gay (2008) expanded the framework, emphasizing the importance of using students' cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles to make learning more appropriate and effective. More recently, Hammond (2020) connected culturally responsive teaching to neuroscience, highlighting how culture shapes cognition and how instructional practices can leverage cultural familiarity to strengthen cognitive engagement. Together, these scholars demonstrate that culturally responsive pedagogy is not about superficial celebrations of diversity; it is about transforming instruction, curriculum, and relationships to affirm identity and promote equity.

CORE COMPONENTS OF CRP

By synthesizing various literature sources, the importance of recognizing cultural backgrounds, fostering positive relationships, adapting instructional strategies, and promoting critical consciousness within educational settings becomes evident (Caingcoy, 2023). This systematic approach emphasizes the crucial role of educators in developing an understanding of their students' cultural backgrounds and histories, alongside cultivating authentic relationships (Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024).

Fostering Positive Relationships

Culturally responsive teaching is characterized by its validating and affirming nature, acknowledging the legitimacy of various ethnic groups' cultural heritages and using them as foundational elements for instruction (Fields, 2020). Trust is foundational to CRP; educators who learn about students' communities and demonstrate genuine care foster stronger engagement and academic risk-taking. This pedagogical approach, encompassing culturally responsive teaching and culturally relevant pedagogy, explicitly acknowledges how students' cultural backgrounds shape their learning processes and seeks to sustain these backgrounds within educational settings (Anyichie & Butler, 2023). By validating and affirming students' identities, CRP aims to foster critical thinking and improve academic achievement, recognizing that learning is a socially mediated process inextricably linked to students' racial, cultural, and linguistic experiences (Caingcoy, 2023; Pinetta, 2023; Prayitno et al., 2024).

Adapting Instructional Strategies

An asset-based approach recognizes that multilingualism is a cognitive strength, community-based knowledge is valuable knowledge, cultural identity enhances rather than hinders academic development, and families support education in diverse and meaningful ways. This shift demands reframing questions. Instead of asking, "Why can't these students perform?" educators ask, "How can instruction connect more meaningfully to students' lived experiences?" High expectations must remain central. Culturally responsive pedagogy does not lower standards; rather, it provides equitable access to meeting them (Fahadah & Thomps, 2025).

SHIFTING FROM DEFICIT TO ASSET-BASED THINKING

Moving away from a deficit mindset requires intentional reflection and systemic change. Educators must critically examine their own assumptions about intelligence, behavior, language, and family engagement (Abdalla & Moussa, 2024). Such an approach intrinsically validates the diverse cultural knowledge and experiences that students bring, thereby fostering a more inclusive and equitable learning environment that actively bridges the cultural divide between educators and learners (Fahadah & Thomps, 2025). Culturally responsive pedagogy is a crucial framework in education that leverages students' diverse backgrounds to foster inclusive learning environments (Caingcoy, 2023). This pedagogical approach enhances academic achievement and engagement by acknowledging and integrating students' cultural perspectives into instructional practices (Caingcoy, 2023; Fahadah & Thomps, 2025). It actively seeks to embed students' cultural experiences, values, and

perspectives into the curriculum, thereby fostering greater student engagement and academic success (Shohel et al., 2024). This integration is crucial not only for validating students' identities but also for building upon their unique knowledge and schema to propel learning and critical thinking (Hernandez & Darling-Hammond, 2022). This framework, drawing from the theoretical foundations of Critical Race Theory and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, challenges institutionalized discrimination and empowers students through culturally affirming teaching practices (Abdalla & Moussa, 2024).

SYSTEMATIC IMPLICATIONS

Dismantling deficit perspectives also require systemic change. Schools must evaluate policies that contribute to inequity, including tracking systems, biased disciplinary procedures, and inequitable funding models (Caingcoy, 2023). Professional development must move beyond surface-level diversity training toward sustained, reflective learning focused on bias, culturally sustaining instruction, and anti-racist practice. Leadership plays a critical role. Administrators set the tone by promoting inclusive curricula, equitable hiring practices, and accountability structures centered on student belonging and achievement. Shifting mindsets can provoke discomfort. Some educators may interpret culturally responsive pedagogy as political or fear it compromises academic rigor. However, research consistently demonstrates that when students feel seen and valued, achievement increases (Knowles-Davis & Moore, 2023). Its systematic description by Gay and Ladson-Billings established CRP as a research-based practice, evolving to incorporate institutional, peer, and psychological dimensions that collectively influence educational outcomes (Zeng et al., 2025).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: VALENCIA DEFICIT THEORY

Richard R. Valencia's seminal work on deficit thinking provides one of the most comprehensive theoretical frameworks for understanding how educational systems perpetuate inequity by locating academic failure within students, their families, and their communities rather than examining structural and systemic factors. Valencia's theory, extensively articulated in his 1997 book "The Evolution of Deficit Thinking: Educational Thought and Practice" and further developed in his 2010 work "Dismantling Contemporary Deficit Thinking: Educational Thought and Practice," offers a critical lens for examining the persistent achievement gaps in education.

CORE TENETS OF VALENCIA'S DEFICIT THEORY

1. The Blaming the Victim Paradigm

At the heart of Valencia's deficit theory is the concept of "blaming the victim," a term originally coined by William Ryan (1971). Valencia argues that deficit thinking operates by locating the source of educational problems in the alleged deficiencies of students from low-income and minority backgrounds. Rather than examining how schools are structured to disadvantage certain groups, deficit thinking attributes school failure to:

- Cognitive deficits: assumptions that students lack intelligence or cognitive abilities
- Motivational deficits: beliefs that students and their families do not value education

- Linguistic deficits: views that non-standard English or bilingualism represents a disadvantage
- Cultural deficits: perceptions that students' cultural backgrounds lack the "cultural capital" valued in schools
- Familial deficits: assumptions that parents do not support their children's education

2. APPLICATION TO CRP

Deficit Thinking as the Antithesis of CRP

Valencia's theory provides the theoretical justification for culturally responsive pedagogy. If deficit thinking locates failure in students' cultural backgrounds, CRP does the opposite; it positions culture as an asset and a foundation for learning. Valencia's critique directly supports the CRP framework by demonstrating that:

- Cultural difference is not cultural deficit: What deficit thinking frames as "lack" is actually a difference that should be valued and leveraged
- Systemic change is necessary: Individual teacher efforts are insufficient without addressing institutionalized deficit thinking
- High expectations are essential: Deficit thinking lowers expectations; CRP must maintain high expectations while providing culturally affirming support
- Critical consciousness is required – Educators must develop awareness of how deficit thinking operates in themselves and their institutions

Valencia's Anti-Deficit Framework

Valencia (2010) proposes an anti-deficit thinking framework that aligns closely with culturally responsive pedagogy:

DEFICIT THINKING	ANTI-DEFICIT ALTERNATIVE
✗ Blame students for failure	✓ Examines systemic barriers
✗ Sees cultural difference as a weakness	✓ Recognizes cultural differences as an asset
✗ Lowers expectations	✓ Maintains high expectations with support
✗ Individualizes problems	✓ Contextualizes achievement within structural factors

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DEFICIT THINKING	ANTI-DEFICIT ALTERNATIVE
✗ Pathologizes communities	✓ Engages communities as partners
↓ Perpetuates Inequity	↓ Promotes Educational Justice

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore educators' perceptions of deficit thinking and their engagement with culturally responsive pedagogical practices in secondary school settings. A case study approach was appropriate as it allows for an in-depth, contextualized examination of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-world setting (Yin, 2018). The case was bounded by three secondary schools in the Buffalo Municipality, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa, selected for their diverse learner populations and varying degrees of exposure to inclusive education policies.

The qualitative paradigm was chosen because it prioritizes understanding participants' lived experiences, meanings, and sense-making processes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study sought not merely to identify whether deficit thinking existed, but to understand how it manifested in teachers' beliefs and practices, and how educators conceptualized culturally responsive alternatives.

SAMPLING STRATEGY

Purposive sampling was employed to select both schools and participants. Schools were selected based on the following criteria: (1) location within the Buffalo Municipality, (2) diverse socioeconomic and cultural learner populations, and (3) willingness of school leadership to participate in research examining pedagogical practices.

Within each school, participants were purposively selected using the following inclusion criteria:

- Minimum of three years teaching experience to ensure established pedagogical perspectives
- Teaching across various subject areas to capture disciplinary variations
- Representation of different grade levels
- Willingness to engage in reflective discussion about teaching practices and learner diversity

The final sample comprised 30 teachers, with 10 participants from each of the three schools. Participant demographics included:

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Data was collected through:

Semi-Structured Interviews

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 30 participants, lasting between 45 and 75 minutes each. Interviews were guided by a protocol exploring:

- Teachers' understandings of learner underachievement and its causes
- Perceptions of cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity in their classrooms
- Awareness of deficit thinking as a concept
- Current practices for engaging with diverse learners
- Knowledge of and experience with culturally responsive pedagogy
- Challenges encountered in addressing learner diversity

Interviews were conducted in locations chosen by participants (school offices) at times convenient for them. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' written consent and transcribed verbatim. Follow-up clarification interviews were conducted with 30 participants in person to verify interpretations and further explore emergent themes.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis employed reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021), which emphasizes the active role of the researcher in constructing patterns of meaning:

Phase 1: Data Familiarization. All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, producing 487 pages of text. Transcripts were checked against recordings for accuracy. Observational field notes were typed and organized. Researchers read and re-read all data multiple times, making initial notes and observations.

Phase 2: Initial Coding. Systematic coding was conducted using Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software. Both semantic codes (explicit surface meanings) and latent codes (underlying assumptions and conceptualizations) were generated. Initial coding identified 187 distinct codes across the dataset.

Phase 3: Generating Initial Themes. Codes were grouped into potential themes based on patterns, relationships, and relevance to the research questions. Visual thematic mapping was used to explore connections between codes and candidate themes.

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes. Candidate themes were reviewed against coded extracts and the entire dataset to ensure they captured the essence of the data. Themes were refined, merged, split, or discarded through iterative discussion among the research team.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes. Each theme was clearly defined, with scope, boundaries, and essence articulated. Subthemes were identified within major themes to capture nuanced distinctions.

Phase 6: Producing the Report. The final analysis was written up, selecting vivid, compelling examples of extracts that illustrate each theme while connecting to the research questions and theoretical framework.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Fort Hare's Research Ethics Committee (Protocol Number: IFHREC-25/07-0532). Permission was secured from the Eastern Cape Department of Education and principals of participating schools.

All participants received detailed information sheets explaining the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, including specific consent for audio recording. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Anonymity and confidentiality were protected through:

- Use of pseudonyms (Teacher 1, Teacher 2, etc.) in all transcripts and reporting
- Secure storage of data on password-protected computers
- Removal of identifying information from all documents
- Aggregation of data where individual identification might be possible
- Participants were offered the opportunity to review their interview transcripts and observation notes upon request.

RESULTS

The analysis of interview transcripts and observational field notes revealed three major themes and eleven subthemes related to deficit thinking and culturally responsive pedagogy. These themes are presented below, accompanied by illustrative quotations and observational evidence.

THEME 1: PERVASIVE DEFICIT DISCOURSES

The most prominent theme across the dataset was the widespread presence of deficit-oriented explanations for learner underachievement. All 30 participants, to varying degrees, articulated perspectives that located educational problems within learners, their families, or their communities rather than within systemic or institutional factors.

Subtheme 1.1: Cultural Deficit Attributions

Eighteen participants explicitly attributed learner failure to cultural characteristics. Teacher 2's statement exemplified this perspective:

"Some learners fail due to their cultural differences. The way they are raised, their values, what they consider important, it's not always aligned with what school demands. You find that education is not prioritized in some cultures."

These framing positions culture as a barrier rather than a resource, with Teacher 2 suggesting that certain cultures inherently devalue education. Similar sentiments were expressed by Teacher 15:

"These learners come from backgrounds where education is not seen as important. Their parents didn't finish school, so they don't push them. It's a cycle the culture of not valuing education gets passed down."

The phrase "these learners" functioned discursively to construct learners from particular backgrounds as a homogeneous group defined by presumed cultural deficiencies. Notably, participants rarely specified which cultural groups they referenced, using vague categories such as "some cultures" or "these communities," which allowed deficit attributions to circulate without explicit naming.

Subtheme 1.2: Linguistic Deficit

Fourteen participants expressed views positioning learners' home languages as obstacles to learning. Teacher 11 commented:

"The problem is that they speak their home language all the time, even in class when they should be practicing English. Their English vocabulary is limited, their grammar is weak, and it holds them back across all subjects."

This perspective frames multilingualism as a deficit rather than a cognitive asset. Teacher 25 offered a more extreme view:

"Sometimes I think we should just ban home languages at school. Force them to speak English all the time. That's the only way they'll learn. They're never going to succeed in this country if they can't speak English properly."

Such statements reveal assimilationist assumptions that require learners to abandon their linguistic identities to succeed academically. None of the participants discussed strategies for leveraging home languages as resources for learning English or other content.

THEME 2: CRITICAL AWARENESS AND RESISTANCE TO DEFICIT THINKING

Despite the prevalence of deficit discourses, a minority of participants demonstrated critical awareness of how deficit thinking operates and its harmful effects. This theme captured counternarratives that challenged deficit assumptions.

Subtheme 2.1: Recognizing Deficit as a Discursive Construction

Five participants explicitly named and critiqued deficit thinking as a phenomenon. Teacher 10's observation was particularly incisive:

"Teachers have misused the term culture as a panacea to explain everything from school failure to problems with behaviour. When a learner struggles, instead of asking 'What could I do differently?' or 'What might be happening in this child's life?' we say 'It's their culture.' It becomes a convenient excuse that lets us off the hook."

This statement demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of how "culture" functions as a discursive resource that absolves teachers and schools of responsibility. Teacher 10 continued:

"I've sat in staff meetings where we blame the community, blame the parents, blame the learners themselves. We never ask what we're not doing. We never ask whether our teaching is connecting with these children. It's always someone else's fault."

Teacher 4 similarly reflected:

"I catch myself doing it too. A learner fails my test and my first thought is 'Well, what can you expect? Look where they come from.' But then I have to stop and think: Did I teach that concept well? Did I check for understanding? Did I make it relevant to their lives? Usually the answer is no, but it's easier to blame them."

These statements reveal emerging critical consciousness, with teachers acknowledging their complicity in deficit thinking while recognizing the psychological comfort it provides.

Subtheme 2.2: Structural and Systemic Explanations

Eight participants offered explanations for underachievement that moved beyond individual or cultural deficits to consider structural factors. Teacher 17 stated:

"We have to be honest about the conditions these children live in. Overcrowded homes, no electricity, no quiet place to study, hunger, violence in the community. These are real barriers. But the mistake is to turn those barriers into character flaws—to say they're lazy or unmotivated because they can't overcome circumstances that most of us have never faced."

Teacher 22 connected individual experiences to systemic inequality:

"When we blame culture or parents, we ignore history. We ignore apartheid, we ignore how communities were deliberately under-resourced, we ignore that many parents had poor education themselves because the system denied it to them. Learners aren't failing because their culture is deficient. They're navigating the consequences of centuries of oppression. And then we blame them for not succeeding in a system designed by the very people who oppressed their grandparents."

This structural analysis, while present in only a minority of interviews, demonstrates that some teachers possess the critical consciousness that culturally responsive pedagogy requires.

Subtheme 2.3: Evidence-Based Skepticism

Three participants explicitly noted the disconnect between deficit claims and evidence. Teacher 10 observed:

"When teachers talk about cultural deficits affecting performance, I always ask: Show me the evidence. What specifically about Xhosa culture causes learners to fail mathematics? What specific cultural practice prevents learners from reading? Nobody can ever answer. Because the evidence isn't there. It's just a story we tell ourselves."

This skepticism aligns with the study's finding that while teachers claimed cultural deficits existed and affected performance, no participants could provide specific examples of how cultural characteristics causally produced academic failure.

THEME 3: ENVISIONING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE ALTERNATIVES

Despite limited implementation, participants articulated elements of what culturally responsive pedagogy might look like in their contexts.

Subtheme 3.1: Inclusive Approaches Acknowledging Learner Backgrounds

Twenty-one participants expressed general support for approaches that consider learners' cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Teacher 8 stated:

"Schools should adopt an inclusive approach that considers the cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of all learners. We can't just teach the same way we did twenty years ago and expect different results. Learners have changed, communities have changed. Our teaching must change too."

Teacher 14 connected inclusion to learner engagement:

"When learners see themselves in the curriculum—their stories, their communities, their languages—they become interested. They participate more. They believe they can succeed because success doesn't require becoming someone else."

These statements align with the literature's characterization of culturally responsive pedagogy as a "pedagogy of hope" that validates learner identities.

Subtheme 3.2: Practical Strategies Identified by Teachers

Some participants identified specific strategies they believed would support culturally responsive practice:

Home language incorporation: Teachers suggested allowing learners to use their home languages for discussion and initial understanding before producing work in English. Teacher 6 explained:

"Let them talk about the concept in Xhosa first, make sure they understand it, then help them express it in English. Use the language they know as a bridge, not a barrier."

Community engagement: Teachers proposed involving parents and community members as resources. Teacher 21 said:

"We should invite parents to share their knowledge. Many parents have skills, such as building, farming, and storytelling, that connect to the curriculum. But we never ask. We assume they have nothing to offer."

Culturally relevant materials: Participants expressed a desire for textbooks and resources featuring diverse cultural contexts. Teacher 3 noted:

"All our examples are from textbooks written somewhere else. We need materials that show learners succeeding while still being who they are."

Relationship-building: The most frequently mentioned strategy was investing time in getting to know learners personally. Teacher 29 emphasized:

"Before you can teach them, you must know them. Their families, their interests, their struggles, their strengths. Teaching without relationship is just information delivery."

Subtheme 3.3: Barriers to Implementation

Participants also identified significant barriers to implementing culturally responsive approaches:

Curriculum constraints: The pressure to cover prescribed content was the most frequently cited barrier. Teacher 13 explained:

"The syllabus is overcrowded. I have to rush through just to finish. There's no time to find culturally relevant examples, no time to build relationships, no time to differentiate. The system works against responsiveness."

Class size: Large classes were seen as incompatible with individualized, relationship-based approaches. Teacher 27 said:

"I have 60 learners in this classroom. How can I know them all personally? How can I adapt my teaching to 60 different cultural backgrounds? It's impossible."

Inadequate preparation: Many participants felt their teacher education had not prepared them for diverse classrooms. Teacher 5 reflected:

"They taught us theories, but never how to actually teach learners who are different from us. I left university knowing Piaget and Vygotsky, but not knowing how to connect with a Xhosa child from a rural background."

Institutional resistance: Some participants noted that culturally responsive efforts were neither supported nor actively discouraged by school leadership. Teacher 20 stated:

"When I try to use examples from learners' lives, I'm told I'm wasting time. When I allow home language discussion, I'm told I'm not teaching English properly. The message is clear: stick to the script."

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The findings reveal a complex picture. Deficit thinking remains pervasive, with most teachers attributing underachievement to cultural, familial, and linguistic deficiencies in learners and their communities. These attributes function to absolve teachers and schools of responsibility while masking systemic inequities. However, a minority of participants demonstrated critical

awareness of how deficit thinking operates and offered structural explanations for educational disparities. Observational data confirmed that deficit assumptions translate into differential treatment, lowered expectations, and curriculum choices that may perpetuate rather than interrupt patterns of underachievement.

Despite limited implementation of culturally responsive practices, most participants expressed support for inclusive approaches and identified potential strategies such as incorporating home languages, engaging communities, using relevant materials, and building relationships that align with CRP principles. Significant barriers, including curriculum constraints, large classes, inadequate preparation, and institutional resistance, impede implementation.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal critical insights into the persistence of deficit thinking among educators and the transformative potential of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) in South African schools. This section discusses the key findings in relation to the existing literature and theoretical framework, highlighting implications for educational practice, policy, and future research.

Deficit Thinking as a Persistent Barrier

The findings revealed that teachers attributed learner underachievement to cultural differences, with Teacher 2 explicitly stating that "some learners fail due to their cultural differences." This alignment with Valencia's (2010) deficit theory confirms that deficit thinking remains deeply embedded in educational discourse. The teacher's perspective locates the problem of academic failure within students' cultural backgrounds rather than examining how school structures, curricula, and pedagogical practices may be failing to accommodate cultural diversity.

This finding corroborates Murry et al.'s (2020) assertion that deficit-laden biases significantly impact pedagogical approaches, particularly concerning students from diverse cultural backgrounds. When educators frame cultural difference as deficiency, they inadvertently perpetuate what Valencia (2010) terms the "blaming the victim" paradigm, shifting responsibility away from systemic inequities and onto students and their communities.

However, Teacher 10 offered a crucial counter-perspective, observing that "teachers have misused the term culture as a panacea to explain everything from school failure to problems with behaviour." This insight suggests that some educators recognize how "culture" has become a convenient explanatory framework that absolves schools of their responsibility to provide appropriate, responsive education. This aligns with Belle's (2010) argument that deficit models position teachers as gatekeepers of dominant culture while invalidating students' existing ways of knowing and being.

The Cycle of Deficit Thinking in Practice

Teacher 3's observation provides compelling evidence of Valencia's (2010) deficit cycle in operation: "Learners sometimes are to be blamed for their underachievement and they should

not hide behind the cultural deficit. The school itself is not held accountable and is absolved of its responsibilities to educate appropriately, with the burden almost entirely shifted to learners and families."

This statement powerfully illustrates the systematic nature of deficit thinking. The teacher explicitly notes how schools are "absolved of responsibilities" while the burden shifts to learners and families. This reflects Valencia's (2010) contention that deficit thinking serves an ideological function by masking systemic inequity. By locating failure in students and their communities, educational institutions are excused from examining how their own structures, practices, and assumptions may be producing inequitable outcomes.

The cycle identified by Valencia (2010) is evident here: identification of "problems" (learner underachievement), deficit attribution (cultural differences), lowered expectations (implied by blaming learners), and validation of deficit beliefs (through continued underachievement). This cycle perpetuates itself, creating what Ladson-Billings (2006) terms the "education debt"—the cumulative result of historical, economic, and sociopolitical inequities.

The Cultural Deficit Fallacy

Silvermann's (2011) definition, cited in the findings, frames cultural deficit perspective as a view that individuals from some cultural groups cannot achieve because of their cultural background. The findings suggest that while teachers claimed cultural deficits existed and affected learner performance, there was no actual evidence of such deficits. This disjuncture between teacher perceptions and empirical reality is significant.

This finding supports Fahadah and Thomps' (2025) assertion that deficit paradigms overlook the rich cultural capital and diverse epistemologies that students from marginalized communities bring to the classroom. The perception of cultural deficit persists despite the absence of evidence, suggesting that deficit thinking operates as Valencia (2010) terms it: a "pseudoscience founded on racial and class bias" rather than on empirical observation of student capabilities.

The Transformative Potential of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

The findings implicitly point toward culturally responsive pedagogy as the necessary alternative to deficit approaches. As Knowles-Davis and Moore (2023) argue, CRP offers a transformative framework that directly challenges deficit paradigms by valuing students' cultural backgrounds and integrating them into the learning process.

The literature review established that CRP recognizes culture, language, and lived experience as assets that enhance learning (Caingcoy, 2023; Küçükakın et al., 2025). This stands in direct opposition to the deficit perspectives expressed by some teachers in this study. Where deficit thinking frames cultural difference as a liability, CRP positions it as a foundation for learning. Golden's (2017) emphasis on moving beyond static notions of culture to embrace multiplicity of practices as cultural processes is particularly relevant here. The teachers who misuse "culture as a panacea" (Teacher 10) may be operating with static, reductionist understandings of culture. CRP requires educators to develop more nuanced, dynamic understandings of how culture operates in learning contexts.

The Importance of Critical Consciousness

The findings highlight the urgent need for what Abdalla and Moussa (2024) term "critical consciousness" among educators. Teachers must develop awareness of how deficit thinking operates in themselves and their institutions. Valencia's (2010) anti-deficit framework provides guidance for this development, suggesting shifts from blaming students to examining systemic barriers, from seeing cultural difference as weakness to recognizing it as asset, and from pathologizing communities to engaging them as partners. The findings suggest that these shifts have not yet occurred for many teachers in the study context.

Systemic Implications

The findings underscore Caingcoy's (2023) assertion that dismantling deficit perspectives requires systemic change, not just individual teacher reflection. Teacher 3's observation about schools being "absolved of responsibilities" points to the institutional nature of deficit thinking. Individual teachers hold deficit perspectives, but these perspectives are embedded in and reinforced by school structures, policies, and practices.

Professional development must move beyond surface-level diversity training toward sustained, reflective learning focused on bias and culturally sustaining instruction (Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024). Leadership plays a critical role in setting the tone for inclusive curricula, equitable practices, and accountability structures centered on student belonging and achievement.

Alignment with Valencia's Anti-Deficit Framework

The findings strongly support Valencia's (2010) anti-deficit framework. The teachers' deficit perspectives align with Valencia's characterization of deficit thinking as blaming students for failure, seeing cultural difference as weakness, lowering expectations, individualizing problems, and pathologizing communities. The alternative framework suggested by the literature, culturally responsive pedagogy, aligns with Valencia's anti-deficit alternatives: examining systemic barriers, recognizing cultural difference as an asset, maintaining high expectations with support, contextualizing achievement within structural factors, and engaging communities as partners.

This alignment confirms the theoretical validity of Valencia's framework for understanding South African educational contexts, extending its application beyond the U.S. context where it was originally developed.

Implications for Teacher Preparation

The findings have significant implications for teacher preparation programs. If practicing teachers hold deficit perspectives about learners' cultural backgrounds, initial teacher education must do more to challenge these assumptions before they become entrenched. As Mansfield and Lambrinou (2024) argue, teacher preparation must include opportunities for candidates to examine their own biases, learn about students' cultural backgrounds as assets, and develop strategies for culturally responsive practice.

The finding that teachers "misused the term culture as a panacea" (Teacher 10) suggests that superficial exposure to cultural concepts may be counterproductive. Teacher preparation must provide deep, theoretically grounded understanding of culture and its relationship to learning, not just superficial celebrations of diversity.

CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated deficit thinking among educators in three secondary schools in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, and explored the potential of culturally responsive pedagogy as a transformative alternative. The findings revealed that deficit perspectives remain prevalent, with teachers attributing learner underachievement to cultural differences despite the absence of evidence for such deficits. Some teachers recognized that "culture" has been misused as an explanatory framework that absolves schools of responsibility for providing appropriate, responsive education. The study confirmed the operation of Valencia's (2010) deficit cycle in South African educational contexts, with schools shifting blame to learners and families while failing to examine their own structures, practices, and assumptions.

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several theoretical contributions. First, it extends the application of Valencia's Deficit Theory (2010) to the South African context, demonstrating its utility for understanding educational inequity beyond the U.S. setting where it was originally developed. The alignment between Valencia's framework and the findings confirms that deficit thinking operates across national boundaries while taking locally specific forms.

Second, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on culturally responsive pedagogy by situating it within the South African context. The findings support Caingcoy's (2023) systematic overview of CRP components—recognizing cultural backgrounds, fostering positive relationships, adapting instructional strategies, and promoting critical consciousness—while highlighting the specific challenges and opportunities of implementing these approaches in post-apartheid South Africa.

Third, the study advances understanding of the relationship between deficit thinking and systemic inequity. Teacher 3's observation about schools being "absolved of responsibilities" illustrates Valencia's (2010) contention that deficit thinking serves an ideological function by masking systemic inequity and diverting attention from structural factors that produce educational disparities.

Practical Implications
For Educators

The findings underscore the urgent need for educators to critically examine their own assumptions about learners and their cultural backgrounds. Teachers must recognize how deficit thinking shapes their expectations and practices, and actively work to replace deficit perspectives with asset-based approaches that value cultural difference as a foundation for

learning. This requires ongoing reflection, engagement with culturally responsive pedagogy literature, and willingness to learn from learners and their communities.

For Schools and Districts

Schools must evaluate policies and practices that may reinforce deficit thinking, including disciplinary procedures, curriculum choices, and assessment practices. Professional development must move beyond superficial diversity training toward sustained, reflective learning focused on bias, culturally sustaining instruction, and anti-deficit practice. Leadership plays a critical role in setting expectations for inclusive practice and creating accountability structures centered on learner belonging and achievement.

For Teacher Preparation Programs

Initial teacher education programs must do more to challenge deficit assumptions before they become entrenched. This requires integrating critical examination of deficit thinking throughout the curriculum, providing opportunities for candidates to examine their own biases, teaching about the historical and contemporary manifestations of deficit thinking, and preparing teachers to be advocates for equity and systemic change. Programs should ensure that candidates understand culture as dynamic and multifaceted, not as a static "panacea" for explaining educational outcomes.

For Policymakers

The findings have implications for educational policy at provincial and national levels. Education White Paper 6's commitment to inclusive education provides a policy foundation, but implementation remains uneven. Policymakers must ensure adequate resources for professional development in culturally responsive practice, support for schools serving diverse populations, and accountability mechanisms that recognize the importance of cultural responsiveness alongside academic outcomes. Policy should explicitly address deficit thinking as a barrier to inclusion and equity.

The Imperative of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

This study confirms that culturally responsive pedagogy is not merely an instructional approach but an ethical and educational imperative. As the literature reviewed demonstrates, CRP offers a framework for moving beyond deficit thinking toward educational practice that validates learner identities, builds on cultural strengths, and promotes critical consciousness. In the South African context, with its history of apartheid and ongoing struggles for educational equity, CRP takes on particular significance. The post-apartheid commitment to inclusive education requires pedagogical approaches that actively counter the deficit assumptions embedded in colonial and apartheid education systems. CRP, informed by Valencia's critique of deficit thinking, provides a pathway toward realizing this commitment. However, as the findings reveal, implementing CRP requires more than individual teacher effort. It requires systemic change, institutional commitment, and ongoing support. Schools must become places where cultural difference is genuinely valued, where learners see themselves represented in curriculum and pedagogy, and where educators maintain high

expectations while providing culturally affirming support. The journey from deficit to asset-based thinking, from extraction to co-creation, from blame to partnership, is neither simple nor quick. It requires humility, courage, and persistence. But as this study demonstrates, it is a journey worth undertaking. For learners who have been positioned as deficient, for communities whose knowledge has been devalued, and for educators committed to genuine inclusion, culturally responsive pedagogy offers a vision of education that honors all learners and enables all to thrive.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study's recommendation for longitudinal research is apt. Understanding how deficit thinking changes over time, how CRP implementation evolves, and what outcomes are possible requires sustained investigation. Future research must continue this work, building on the foundation this study provides and extending it in new directions. The ultimate goal is the educational systems that recognize and celebrate cultural diversity as a strength, not a deficit remains before us, calling for continued effort, reflection, and commitment. Future research should track teachers' developing understandings and practices, as well as learner outcomes, over extended periods. Additional research is needed to explore:

- How deficit thinking manifests differently across various cultural and linguistic contexts in South Africa
- Effective strategies for challenging deficit perspectives in teacher preparation and professional development
- The relationship between teacher deficit perspectives and actual learner outcomes
- Successful examples of CRP implementation in South African schools and the factors enabling them
- Learner perspectives on experiences of deficit thinking and culturally responsive practice

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